Super Authentic Ancient Town. The Case of Wuzhen in China

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CITTÀ ANTICA SUPER-AUTENTICA. IL CASO DI WUZHEN IN CINA

Wuzhen, in Cina, è spesso indicato come il "modello" per la trasformazione delle aree del nucleo storico in vista della conservazione del patrimonio culturale per lo sfruttamento turistico. Il dibattito sulla sua "autenticità" è stato sempre acceso. Questo articolo prende Wuzhen come esempio, discute in che misura l'autenticità della città antica sia ridefinita dall'intervento di nuove culture o sia invece da inquadrare in processi di riconsiderazione globale delle memorie collettive.

Parole chiave

Autenticità, Wuzhen–Cina, patrimonio, città storica, trasformazione rurale

Keywords

Authenticity, Wuzhen–China, Heritage, Ancient town, Rural transformation

Over the past few decades, the boundary between urban and rural areas has gradually blurred, favoring more hybrid relations between spaces that had diverging trajectories of development and their inhabitants. In particular, ancient villages and towns have been re-evaluated as ideal setting for urban citizens in search of "authentic" rural life, based on simplicity, slow pace, direct contact with farmland, etc. In a debate that emphasizes the tensions between protection and development, the authenticity of ancient towns as implicit icons of new consumption has become the focus of attention. As a special case against this grand background, Wuzhen is frequently referred to as the "model" in China for the transformation of historical core areas in view of cultural heritage preservation for tourism exploitation. The debate on its "authenticity" has been heated all the time. This article reviews three important stages of Wuzhen's transformation in the past 20 years, and analyzes the different pursuits of authenticity in different cultural and economic contexts, based on the design approach and effects of such different pursuits had on different areas of Wuzhen. The Beginning of Wuzhen transformation can be located in Dongzha district. In 1999, 13 historical houses located in the proximity of the river caught fire there, and in the aftermath of such disaster unprecedented transformations took place that anticipated the success of the tourism industry. At that time, Wuzhen encompassed both new houses and old houses, many of which in critical conditions and dilapidated. To prevent other fire accidents, all inconsistent buildings were demolished and the buildings of the old town were repaired by old building components, aiming to provide the "authentic" look of ancient town buildings. A few years later, in 2003, in Xizha district, the Old Street restoration began,

which turned the expectation for an ancient town "looking" into the possibility of "staying" into one. In Xizha hotels and inns were built, in the view that an ancient town could be made available for leisure and vacation, enabling tourists to stay through nightlife entertainments and beautiful sceneries of the old town landscape. The destination experience of tourists does not just come from the consumption of various tourism services(Cohen, 1979). The first – and most controversial – point of this transformation is that all 1420 households in Xizha were relocated(Zhang et al., 2022), to pursue a more systematic restoration process without compromises with buildings adaptation to contemporary needs. In the following years, in order to find new economic development, Wuzhen developed an "augmented" version of its history, with the organization of Drama Festival and the construction of Muxin Art Museum. These new forms of visibility of the ancient town made Wuzhen the perfect permanent venue of the World Internet Conference, which generated a rapid increase in international popularity and number of overseas visitors. At this point, authenticity of the original buildings is no longer in question, and is implicitly assumed as reliable enough, substituted by easy recognition of iconic spots. Simultaneously, postmodern tourists no longer care about the authenticity of the original(Cohen, 1995). Authenticity has become a cultural right and produce authentic places in both senses, historically old and creatively new, offers an alternative to the kind of growth that pushes many groups out (Zukin 2009). Methodologically, the study reconstructs documents related to Wuzhen transformation, in which roles for local residents, tourists, local government and developers are redefined and sorted out. The concept of authenticity is deconstructed in this specific context of an ancient town preserved in its physical features and at the same time changed to prioritize the tourism industry over local residents. The broad questions that the paper discusses are to which extent the authenticity of the ancient town is redefined by the intervention of new cultures, or whether it is instead to be framed in processes of comprehensive reconsideration of collective memories. The paper presents an explorative research based on technical documents and advertisement for the general public, and represents a first stage that will be followed by further analysis and empirical research to be carried out on site.